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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6587
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 001368

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/07/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTH OSSETIA WATER FLOWS AT LAST

REF: TBILISI 1278

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b)&(d).

¶1. (C) On the evening of June 7, the South Ossetian de facto authorities re-opened the drinking water pipeline in Java, allowing water to flow south to villages controlled by the Tbilisi-backed government of Dmitry Sanakoyev, and from there farther south to the de facto authorities' "capital" of Tskhinvali. Tskhinvali had been without water for two weeks

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after the water pipe went dry due to holes caused by both storm damage and intentional puncturing by farmers seeking to irrigate their fields (reftel). As recounted to us by OSCE officials, on June 5 a Georgian crew finished repairing the most serious problem in the pipe: a place in Kheiti, in the Georgian enclave, where the pipe had dislodged from a concrete support during recent storms. A joint team consisting of OSCE staff and engineers, as well representatives of both sides, viewed the repairs that day, and OSCE believed that the pipe was at that point sufficiently repaired to transport drinking water to Tskhinvali. Nevertheless, de facto officials refused for two

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days to re-open the pipe in Java, where they blocked it several days earlier, claiming they were not convinced that the pipeline was in sufficient working order to prevent further damage from the pressure of releasing the water. The reversal of the South Ossetian position came after a day of meetings involving Russia's chief negotiator on the conflict, Yuri Popov.

¶2. (C) Water began reaching Tskhinvali overnight, and the underground reservoirs outside the town were half-filled by the morning of June 8. The water pressure was only about 20 percent of what was expected, however, and a joint team was scheduled to inspect the pipe again June 8 to determine what additional repairs may be needed. The planned inspection fell through, however, as the two sides argued over how much of the pipe to visit: the Georgians wanted to start at the intake point in Edissi, while the South Ossetians said they had agreed to start the inspection only farther south, near Java. Negotiations continue.

¶3. (C) As the water standoff was playing out, tensions also rose over the detention or kidnapping of a number of Georgian citizens by the South Ossetians -- three in one incident and reportedly two in another. Some have since been released, but OSCE has not been able to confirm that all have been. Georgian parliamentary leaders, in a briefing to the diplomatic corps June 5, said these detentions were obviously in retaliation for Georgia's arrest of an Ossetian taxi driver for smuggling into Georgian-controlled territory two Armenian citizens, to whom the de facto authorities had given fraudulent documents purporting to prove they were residents

of South Ossetia. The Georgian MPs stressed that the Ossetian driver had broken Georgian law, and his case would be treated as a law enforcement matter.

14. (C) Comment: The initial cutoff of water in May does not appear to have been intentional; farmers have been drilling holes in the pipe for irrigation every summer for years, causing annual water problems, and this year the storm damage at Kheiti worsened the problem. Once it happened, however, both sides tried to use the problem for political gain, making it very hard to solve. In the beginning, the Georgians refused to permit repair teams from Tskhinvali to repair the pipe, making the Georgians look obstructionist and doing them no favors with the population in Tskhinvali (to whom Sanakoyev is trying to appeal) or with the international community. Instead, the Georgians repaired it themselves, but with a delay. Trying to counter the impression of Georgian obstruction in their briefing with diplomats, Georgian parliamentary leaders stressed that Georgia supports rehabilitation of the water pipeline, which is on the list of projects for the donors' economic rehabilitation program, and argued that the main technical problem was with the intake in the separatist-controlled north. By the end, however, it was the South Ossetians who were dragging out the crisis, probably in an attempt to derive some slight political gain.

TEFFT